DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 202 CS 211 298

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TITLE I Can See the Apocalypse Now: News, Politics and Postmodern Culture.
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 68p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (71st, Portland, OR, July 2-5, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Influences; Culture Conflict; *Journalism; *Modernization; *News Media; *Politics; Popular Culture; Public Opinion; *Television; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS News Bias; *Postmodernism; Public Interest; *Sociology of Knowledge; Television News

ABSTRACT

Journalistic practice in the United States has gone through a number of changes in recent history, much of it because of television. The significance of these changes might be better understood with a theory on the social function of news and its relationship to the postmodern culture. News is considered in some way as the ground material of social and political action and provides its consumers with the information they need to act as social and political subjects. To determine the social role of the news it may be necessary to understand that instead of news being taken over by postmodernity, news is fundamentally a part of the cultural dynamics that produce postmodernity. News has subsumed pragmatic social concerns within the propagation of irrelevant spectacle. If this proposition has merit, then it is necessary to reformulate thinking about the news, and concepts developed from postmodern theory ought to have a prominent place on that intellectual agenda. The problem is that the media culture continues to become more fragmented, more superficial, more seductively spectacular, and more ubiquitous all the time. If the material order that perpetuates this is to be opposed, then those who offer more democratic alternatives need to communicate, to generate discourses of meaning that are real and vital enough to a significantly large group of people so that they become motivated to break the usual patterns and act for change. (Seven notes are included, and 21 references are appended.) (MS)

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I Can See the Apocalypse Now: News, Politics and Postmodern Culture

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Journalistic practice in the United States has gone through a number of changes in recent history. We can begin the tale with the rise of television news in the 1950s. The image begins to replace the word as the currency of information. In the 60s, network news shows expand to a half-hour, and for the first time television replaces the newspaper as the primary source of news for most people. Accounts are more condensed. There is no room for depth or analysis. The sheer journalistic speed provided by communication satellites and videotape redoubles the immediacy of the news. Information now comes to us almost instantaneously; this morning's news is stale by this afternoon. The age of televised news brings forth the celebrity correspondent and the star anchor. Soon the news comes under the influence of market research firms. Ratings-conscious news directors begin focusing their attention on the design of the set, the happy-talk patter between segments, and the all important likeability ratings of the on-camera personnel. Thus, news production is reshaped to fit values of form rather than content, entertainment rather than information. In the Midwest at least, weather reports become sophisticated beyond any practical utility; they enter a realm of technological fascination, attracting attention not for the information they relay but for the marvels of the computer/satellite/time-lapse/doppler radar images employed in the relaying. A new genre is born: the info-tainment magazine show ala Entertainment Tonight. For all its reliance on gossip items and press agent handouts, ET also features a number of well done hard news stories on entertainment related topics (e.g. the

Twilight Zone murder case). With the amount of entertainment news and entertaining features on "straight" news shows increasing, the gap between the genres often collapses into confusion.

All of these changes occur to the considerable chagrin of traditional print journalists. Then insult is compounded by injury. With the appearance of USA Today, and the subsequent spread of its influence to local papers around the country, the practices of television news become reflected back into the newspaper. Color seems to be everything, content nothing. Again, weather news becomes a primary attraction based on graphic style. TV length stories, written in TV style, summarized in a column of 10-second-spot-like bullets are dispensed from a coin box purposefully designed to look like a 19" TV set. It was bad enough for the old hands to see the public turn from real news--newspaper news--to blow-dry haircuts and beautifully capped teeth. Now they must face the remaining outposts of truth and authentic practice being remade into the image of the voracious, corrupting enemy.

What is the significance of all this for a theory of the social function of news? Is there something postmodern going on here? The scenario above certainly fits in with the sort of socio/cultural transformations mapped by Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard and other theorists of postmodernity. Yet, news--at least in terms of the ways we usually think about it--seems at essence to be just the opposite sort of cultural product from the fragmented, inauthentic gloss of such postmodern paradigms as MTV and Miami Vice. Before

attempting to suggest resolutions to this apparent contradiction, we must clarify its terms of opposition.

Views of the News

Most common conceptions of the social role of news share a fundamental underlying principle: news is considered in some way as the ground material of social and political action. The most frequently recited version, especially by journalists themselves, is based in pragmatist philosophy: news provides its consumers with the information they need to act as social and political subjects. As Dan Rather (1987) put it "News is... a light on the horizon. A beacon that helps the citizens of a democracy find their way." Similarly, journalist turned sociologist Robert Park (1939) saw the essence of news as its relevance to subjective action:

> It is this notion of importance which seems, finally, to be the distinctive and determining specification in the conception of news. Events, if they are to have for the reader the character of news, must be not merely interesting but important. Importance seems, however, to be a quality like hot and cold; that is, relative to time and space... History is often quite as interesting as news. But the events history records have ceased to be important because there is nothing one can do about them. On the other hand, when there is nothing to be done about the events in the newspaper they have ceased to be news. (p. xvii)

There is a distinct separation in this view between news/public affairs products and entertainment. The latter is seen as generally apolitical, a distraction from the relevant, a realm for the reflection of personal emotions rather than the rational exercise of social interest. Park again:

> News has to do with with events in a real world and gets whatever importance it has from that fact. Fiction and art, generally, are symbolic in character and concerned with

> incidents in an ideal world beyond time and space. For that reason fiction and art have no importance in the sense in which that term applies to news. (p. xvii)

To allow individuals to orient themselves in the larger social world outside the confines of their immediate experience, news must provide an accurate window onto all relevant events in that world. Conventional news practice is considered to do a pretty good job of this. The idea is to prevent encroachments on this process. From this point of view news criticism consists of blowing the whistle on deviations from the accepted standards of good news conduct. When journalistic presentations stop short of "all the news that's fit to print," the window begins to close. When the news displays hints of subjective bias, faulty glass begins to distort the view. In either case, when social vision becomes occluded the result is misdirected social action, dysfunctional behavior. Thus TV critics bemoan the lack of public affairs programming and Rather decries the Tisch era layoffs at CBS News based on the same rationale as the constant quest for objectivity: a bad information package produces bad citizens and bad politics.

This view of the news is often attacked by critical scholars on ideological grounds, but this opposition generally retains the basic principle. A variation of the pragmatist concept remains as an ideal of what the news <u>ought</u> to be, but the standard practice of news is seen as a more-or-less thorough perversion of the ideal. News is still the formative substance of the political, but power has been exercised on it in such a way as to shape the political action proceeding from it in favor of

an unjust and injurious social order. Objectivity is not prescribed, for it is not considered possible. All concepts of reality are taken to be subjective social constructions, and therefore to embody particular social interests (e.g. class interests). Since news producers and the owners of news organizations belong to a different class from the mass of news consumers, their interests must eventually conflict. Thus, the questions for news become what interests and whose reality guide its production, what sort of reality its consumers reconstruct from its presentation, and whose interests these reconstructions serve. The problem is not that news is biased, but that it has <u>their</u> bias. It works to construct us into a world of meanings springing from elite interests rather than our own material situation, cultivating "common sense" from the seeds of dominant ideology. Thus subjectivity becomes at least partly imperialized; people become likely to act unwittingly in support of their own social subordination. Some theorists have viewed this process as virtually total and irrevocable, but most critical scholars, especially recently, see leaks and cracks in the ruling hegemony, making its maintenance a matter of contestation. The production of meaning, of social reality, and of subjectivity itself become sites of conflict between the dominant and the dominated. The critical position has not usually separated news/public affairs and entertainment, because one is considered just as much a tool for the distribution of ideology as the other. The two types of media are merely formal variations on the dominant fictions. News and entertainment not only share the same political function,

they share many of the same discursive means of accomplishing it: stereotyping, realist codes, genre conventions, identification, myth, manipulation, narrative closure, etc. The public sphere becomes ruled by the following equation: controlled media images --> constricted realm of meaning --> co-opted social and political action.

From either point of view, the production and consumption of news is an important factor forming the grounds for political participation. Thus, how the news itself is constituted becomes a matter of politics, be it partisan debate or class-based struggle. This sort of conception of media/society dynamics is radically opposed by postmodern theory.

A Capsule Summary of Thought on the Postmodern

Lyotard (1984) states that knowledge has fragmented, that metanarratives--the unifying myths of society and culture (scientific truth, progress, etc.)--have lost credulity and are disappearing. Jameson (1983, 1984) argues that cultural production has fallen into a depthless, blank pastiche of the surfaces of previous forms. History is effaced. Temporal structure collapses, and since the production of meaning requires the sign to connect the present to the past and/or future, consequently the chain of signification breaks down as well. Spatial order gives way in the delirious business of the contemporary landscape and the new architecture. The subject can no longer locate itself in time and space. Cultural activity becomes reconstituted as an aleatory, schizophrenic immersion in signs and images themselves, their referents having been severed.

Baudrillard (1980, 1983a, 1983b) discusses many of the same things in different terms. The real is replaced with a hyper-real: a series of simulations, models generated from other models, representations only of previous representations. Omnipresent media deliver an incessant stream of solicitous information. The individual has no defence, the exterior is forced into the interior, the bounds of subjectivity are torn away by the networks of information. But information no longer communicates, its mass overwhelms its meaning. Poles of opposition collapse in formal and operational abstraction and equivalence. Fascination with the code of transmission (the signifiers) replaces the construction of sense, effacing the communication of any message (the signified) the code might have carried. Meaning implodes, and thus the social implodes as well. The individual becomes a mere surface or screen, passively reflecting the image of other surfaces transmitted by the network.[1]

Conflicting Terms

The oppositions between theories of the news and theories of postmodern culture can be schematized like this:

Historical Continuity	Decontexualized Fragmentation
The just discovered	The recycled
Referent in the real	Referent only in culture
Natural origin	Simulation
Rationality	Affective response
Word	Image
Signification	Fascination
Substance	Surface
Construction of meaning, narrative and categorization	Collapse of meaning, narrative, and all categorical oppositions
Sense	Sensation
Myth	Spectacle

Teleology	Indeterminacy
Directed subjectivity	Decentered subjectivity
[Social action]	[Passivity][2]

Having staked out these conceptual distinctions, we can return to the recent developments in news practice, and ask: How did the news get the way it is now? Are the changes the result of some influence external to journalism, or do they flow from the internal dynamics of news tradition itself? Do they signify a dramatic shift in the social and political function of news, or is the new news just the same old stuff in a flashier package? And just what is the social role of news in the age of Vanna White, anyway?

Three Hypotheses

(1) News still operates like we always thought it did. Relatively minor formal changes appear to have inflated importance because of our proximity to them. News may have gotten a little flashier lately, but it still remains firmly within the realm defined of meaning and social action.

Obviously, postmodernists will find this proposition untenable. It will also have little appeal to disaffected newspaper people since it suggests they have little to complain about except that their profession has found new methods to achieve old ends, making them obsolescent. However, the critical analyst is likely to favor this position. Since ideological unification is theorized as the maintenance system of the social order, if social meaning fragments or collapses, we would have to expect the social order would also collapse or be forced to rely on coercive force for its support. Since

we can verify empirically that we are experiencing neither social chaos nor authoritarian police control, the ideological function must be firmly in place.

(2) Postmodern culture is imperializing the news. The function of news remained largely in the domain of political action and social interaction until recently. At some point, however, due to developments outside the domain of news, postmodernism came to dominate the cultural sphere generally. This postmodern mass began exerting a sort of gravity on the remaining outposts of meaning and social orientation. Unlike some classical or modern practices that have been able to withstand this force through a series of ties to still extant tradition, or by retreating into a haven of subcultural isolation, news was too close to the mass, its anchors in tradition were too weak, and it was scaled too large to fall back down a narrow path of specialization. Thus the original internal (column 1) dynamics of news have been overrun by a contradictory set of operations (column 2) supplied by what Jameson calls "the cultural dominant." The new arrangement threatens to replace the conflict between good politics and bad politics, played out on the stage of socially relevant reportage, with an anti-politics subsuming the social within the propagation of irrelevant spectacle.

This seems to me to be the most obvious hypothesis, and the one likely to have the most appeal among the various parties interested in the issue. Perceptions of important change in the news are verified and accounted for. Yet, our

old understandings of news are not proven to have been wrong, just to have been superseded in the last few ticks of the cosmic clock. Thus, they still provide the necessary understanding of the starting point in the historical transition. In addition, by casting news developments as a movement between distinct poles, this hypothesis provides a clear basis for normative valuations and prescriptive political guidelines. Print news traditionalists can find philosophical justification for their disgust of USA Today, and a rationale for a return to orthodox practice.[3] For the left-pessimists of postmodernity this hypothesis at least suggests that the transition to postmodernity is itself a matter of conflict, that it can be opposed. It should then be possible to re-evaluate older cultural forms, to see once-hidden progressive aspects and uses of them in the light of contrast to the postmodern. Thus, we should be able to learn how to reconstitute them into some sort of neo-traditionalism that does not favor dominant interests, or to identify cultural elements that can be added to the existing postmodern dynamic to reintroduce potentials for social and political action.

(3) The postmodern has always been incipient in the practice of news. Instead of news being taken over by postmodernity, news is fundamentally a part of the cultural dynamics that produce postmodernity. News has always operated quite differently from classical narrative and other traditional cultural forms. It has never served mainly to construct any particular kind of

meaningful social reality, be it that of the dominant ideology or not. News reception has always been primarily (though not totally) a matter of fragmentation, disconnection and spectacle. Our assumptions of the political nature of news have blinded us to its real political effect. Instead of forming the ground for good politics or bad politics, news has always acted as anti-politics, subsuming pragmatic social concerns within the propagation of irrelevant spectacle. USA Today is not an aberration, but the logical historical extension of the essence of news.

Here we have a hypothesis unlikely to appeal to anyone.[4] First of all, we can not accept it without admitting great error in our previous conceptions. We are forced not only to discard much of our understanding of the news, but to question the more basic assumptions on which that understanding have rested. The proposition is incompatible with the normative views of the print traditionalists. If practices past and present are rooted in the same dynamic, any criticism of USA Today or Frank Magid is reflected back onto the New York Times and William Allen White by implication.[5] The left postmodernist seeking an antidote to pessimism faces a shrinkage in the identifiable cultural forms of opposition to postmodernity. More importantly, movement toward the postmodern must be written further back into history. It now appears as a more enduring and entrenched trend. The destroyer of teleologies ironically seems to have a very strong

teleology of its own. The search for a means of resistance becomes all the more difficult.

Purpose and Disclaimer

I'm afraid I must cast my lot with the third hypothesis, unappealing as it may be. What follows is not an attempt to 'prove' the proposition, but rather to open an investigation of it, to begin framing arguments and lines of enquiry. I aim to begin a debate, not settle one. I'm convinced that we need to reformulate our thinking about the news, and that concepts developed from postmodern theory ought to have a prominent place on that intellectual agenda. My goal then is to probe hypothesis three far enough to persuade scholars of the news to take it, and the issues it defines, seriously.

Re-Viewing the Literature

Sociological discussions of news are invariably framed within the common news-as-grounds-of-the-political notions (column one) noted above. Although a few scholars have dissented from this view in ways that can be taken as suggestive of a postmodern analysis (although none of the authors discussed below is in any way a postmodernist), the literature on news generally views it as either distributing the raw material for pragmatic action or sewing the seeds of ideology. However, even in this writing, there are strong countercurrents with postmodern-esque spin. Scholars expounding pragmatic or critical theoretical frames consistently make specific observations, interior points in the general argument, that simply do not fit their overall schema very well. Ironically, these remarks from the theoretical

opposition serve quite well as an initial illustration of a postmodern understanding of news. Tellingly, postmodern resonances are not confined to discussions of TV news or even print news in the TV age. They also pop up in studies focused on the "quality" press and/or written thirty, forty, and almost fifty years ago--well before the rise of TV news or the spread of postmodern popular culture generally.

These latent tendencies in news scholarship fit in with a variety of aspects of postmodern theory, including the historical/technical/economic contexts for the development of particular aspects of form and particular conditions of reception. Here, however, I will concentrate on statements about cultural form and the manner in which it is consumed by its audience. Drawing on Jameson and Baudrillard, I want to explicate two related yet different modes of postmodern cultural consumption, which will then be traced through some exemplary texts in the study of news.

Schizophrenia (the usage here does not indicate clinical mental illness, rather it is a metaphor derived from Jacques Lacan's linguistic psychoanalytic theory) refers to an immersion in semiotic fragmentation. Culture is broken up into bits and pieces which remain unrelated to each other even as surfaces, except as part of a generalized aleatory flow. The fragments are not encountered individually. There is no spatial or temporal distance separating them. The proliferation of signs is such that they form a kaleidoscopic spectacle of heightened intensity. Temporality and sequence begin to collapse, and with them form

and structure. In the purest form of cultural schizophrenia, as discussed by Jameson, this collapse is complete, and all referentiality--which depends on relationships through time--collapses as well. Units of signification not only fail to connect to each other, but to any base of meaning. The spectator receives an experience of the pure materiality of symbols confined to the immediate present--a fascination with the texture of the image, the timbre and rhythm of speech. Jameson refers to postmodern cultural reception as the experiencing of "intensities" rather than the generation of meanings, and specifically opposes it to any basis for pragmatic action:

> the breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and the intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material--or better still, the literal--Signifier in isolation. The present of the world or material signifier comes before the subject with heightened intensity, bearing a mysterious charge of affect, here described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but which one could just as well imagine in the positive terms of euphoria, the high, the intoxicatory or hallucinogenic energy. (Jameson, 1984, p. 73)

Although Jameson directs his discussion of schizophrenia to disconnection at the most fundamental level of signification, the isolation of individual signifiers, I think the concept is also useful in understanding highly fragmented cultural products where all meaning has not yet been severed, where disconnection occurs between somewhat larger signifying units. Thus, the component signifiers may call up reference to some external realities to some degree, although these reality-effects must necessarily

remain disconnected and unrelated. We can refer to these products as having schizophrenic tendencies, and we can suspect that historical decontexualization and fascination will tend to supersede meaning production in their consumption.

In contrast to schizophrenia, with simulation (the term is Baudrillard's, however the following discussion also incorporates Jameson's allied notion of pastiche) the internal relations of sign systems are reintroduced. Signifiers are ordered into recognizable forms, which may exist across the space and time ranges allowed by the recording or transmitting media (e.g. a painting can relate different elements within the space of its canvas, but not within time, and a radio ad can relate its component parts within its allotted minute of time, but not within space). These sequences and structures engage in a sort of ghostly representation and referentiality, generating an appearance of reality where no reality actually exists. The symbolic arrangements of simulation do not signify anything outside of the realm of mediation. They say nothing about any concrete reality from which their signifiers may be drawn, e.g. Raiders of the Lost Arc is not about archaeology or Nazism or Egypt, but about the filmmakers' (and our) memories of the speed and style of old jungle movies and adventure serials. The only reference in simulation is to the previous appearance of similar representations, to their familiarity as signs and forms. The product of simulation is the simulacrum, "a real without origin," a copy without a (concrete) original. Contemporary simulacra include movies about movies (Raiders...), videos about TV shows

to accompany 80s pop songs about the sound of 50s pop songs ("Uptown Girl"), and all cases of celebrity--people famous for being famous (Vanna). Form becomes the object of fascination in simulation (as opposed to the fascination of isolated signifiers in schizophrenia), e.g. knowing anticipation of each turn in a predictable plot superseding interest in the story being told. Still, the spectator's involvement remains at surface. There is nothing behind or beneath the forms, except perhaps other forms.

In 1940, the pragmatist Robert Park published the now-classic essay "News as Form of Knowledge." As a prologue to his discussion of the specifics of news, Park drew upon fellow pragmatist William James to distinguish two different types of knowledge: "knowledge-about" and "acquaintance-with." Not surprisingly, schizophrenia and simulation cannot be fit anywhere in the pragmatists' schema. They do not count as knowledge at all. Acquaintance-with "is the sort of knowledge one inevitably acquires in the course of one's personal and firsthand encounters with the world about him" (Park, 1940, p. 34). Acquaintance-with is embodied within habit and instinct, the intuition developed over time in the roots of accustomed places and associations. Park says of acquaintance-with, "we come finally to know things not merely through the medium of our special senses but through the responses of our whole organism" (p. 34). He also notes that due to its integration into fundamental understanding, its status as second nature, this form of knowledge "(i.e., the knowledge that gets embodied in habit and custom, as opposed to analytic and formal knowledge) is <u>not</u> likely to be articulate and

communicable" (p. 36, my emphasis). The analytic, formal knowledge referred to here is knowledge-about, which Park also describes as "rational and systematic." He continues, "It is based on observation and on fact but on fact that has been checked, tagged, regimented, and finally ranged in this and that perspective, according to the purpose and point of view of the investigator" (p. 36). He places the academic disciplines,--philosophy, logic, history, the natural sciences--within this category.

For Park, one of these types of knowledge is not more accurate or valid than the other. They are different forms, serving "different functions in the lives of individuals and of society" (p. 39) Thus, we can infer, each form's validity and accuracy is limited to its particular purposive realm. Having distinguished these two realms in the first section of his essay, Park then goes on to consider news as a form of knowledge, but he never definitely places it within one of the categories he has just developed. He indicates quite clearly that news is <u>not</u> knowledge-about: "It is obvious that news is not systematic knowledge like that of the physical sciences" (p. 39) Yet, he never states that news constitutes acquaintance-with. The essay is vague here though, and E Barbara Phillips (1976) and Bernard Roshco (1975), who use Park's categories, firmly place news in acquaintance-with (Roshco even uses "timely acquaintance-with." as his definition of news). I think this is mistaken. Park goes on to discuss the pragmatic value of news, and in doing so he does employ many of the same sorts of terms he used in discussing

acquaintance-with. However, this is highly problematic considering the original definitions from which he started.

The problem here, which is repeated consistently throughout the literature on news, is a failure to distinguish between news as a product of knowledge and a producer of knowledge, between journalists' relation to news-as-knowledge and the audience's relation to news-as-knowledge. As Phillips contends, news-workers may indeed know the world they report on primarily in intuitive, acquaintance-with terms. Yet, this does not mean that news is capable of constituting acquaintance-with knowledge of that world for its consumers. (Much of the literature seems to assume that what goes in on one end must come out at the other.) Park clearly associates acquaintance-with with concrete, sensuous experience, the direct here and now. He also notes that it is constructed through long-standing familiarity, common behaviors and associations. Events in the news are definitely <u>not</u> known in this way by the audience. They are transmitted from distant, unfamiliar scenes. Moreover, news emphasizes not the commonness, but the uncommonness, of the events it relays. The now standard observation that news is defined in terms of social deviance (c.f. Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, 1981) is completely incompatible with acquaintance-with as Park defines it. Park also tells us that true acquaintance-with is extremely difficult to communicate, which hardly seems to fit the news. Park's references to pragmatic functions of news seem odd in that pragmatic action would appear to depend on the form of knowledge which he has just declared news not to be. It is knowledge-about

that Park defines in terms of the subject's purpose. It is knowledge-about that deals with distant realms, rather than immediate experience; it is knowledge-about that is communicable. Park goes on to state, "Political action and political power...rests ultimately, it seems, on the ability of a political society... to act not only concertedly but consistently in accordance with some considered purpose and in furtherance of some rational end" (p. 42). Phillips notes that Park had hoped the newspaper could become an instrument for realizing the pragmatist vision of fostering social action on the basis of thought and knowledge.

> What was needed to transform this vision into reality. Park believed, was "not so much facts as some theoretical scheme" or "philosophic insight" by which daily daily happenings could be placed in "their more general bearings." (Phillips, p. 87)

In both cases, Park explicitly associates pragmatic action with knowledge-about, and in the later quote he clearly suggests that journalism would need to undergo some sort of change in order to serve this function.

If we can't find much support in Park for news constituting one of his forms of knowledge for its audience, we can, on the other hand, find our first traces of the postmodern. Jameson's discussion of temporal discontinuity as the source of schizophrenic experience is prefigured by Park's comparison of news to history:

> News is not history because, for one thing among others, it deals, on the whole, with isolated events and does not seek to relate them to one another either in the form of causal or in the form of teleological sequences. History not only describes events but seeks to put them in their proper place in the historical succession, and, by doing so, to discover the

> underlying tendencies and forces which find expression in them. In fact, one would not be far wrong in assuming that history is quite as much concerned with the connections of events--the relation between the incidents that precede and those that follow--as it is with the events themselves. On the other hand, a reporter, as distinguished from a historian, seeks merely to record each single event as it occurs...
>
> News, as a form of knowledge, is not primarily concerned either with the past or with the future but rather with the present--what has been described by psychologists as 'the specious present.' News may be said to exist only in such a present." (p. 39-40)

Thus, for Park "news comes to us, under ordinary circumstances, not in the form of a continued story but as a series of independent incidents..." and "this transient and ephemeral quality is of the very essence of news..." (p. 41) He later notes that this characteristic of news is related to a more general social pattern:

> The changes in recent years have been so rapid and drastic that the modern world seems to have lost its historical perspective, and we appear to be living from day to day in what I have described earlier as a "specious present." (p. 51)

(Perhaps we ought to pause a minute here to remind ourselves that these words were written in 1940 by a man who had never seen MTV, a Speilberg movie, a MacDonalds or a shopping mall.)

Roshco and Stuart Hall (1981) also discuss the "timeliness" of news in schizo-esque terms:

> The emphasis on timeliness as a news value, with the resultant dependence on familiar highly visible sources whose hastily solicited comments are presented with 'objective' impartiality, impedes the presentation of a useful degree of knowledge-about. Vital complexities and inevitable ambiguities are necessarily glossed over.
>
> At the same time, the combined fragmentation and repetitiveness that mark daily news, and the need to 'freshen' it as frequently as possible, lead to an unanticipated consequence. The fact that news quickly turns stale heightens newsmen's receptiveness to, and emphasis on, the novel and the unexpected--so long as it is sufficiently visible to intrude within their preoccupied ken. This bias toward obtrusive events that are unforeseen, unfamiliar, or untoward

> superficializes the significant and sensationalizes the insignificant. (Roshco, p. 119)

> A heady, breathless immediacy now infects all of the news-magazine (radio) programmes. In terms of their profile of items, these programmes progressively affiliate to the model of the daily newspaper. As events like political confrontation and political disturbance escalate, so the coverage is doubled, quadrupled. As coverage expands, so we become even more alive to to the actual 'violent' events and overwhelmed by the vivid sound and image. But as this coverage takes the characteristic form of actuality without context, it directly feeds our general sense of a meaningless explosion of meaningless and violent acts--'out there' somewhere, in an unintelligible world... (Hall, p. 154)

It is interesting to note here that in Gaye Tuchman's (1973) analysis of how news-workers typify events-as-news according to the demands of producing stories about them, "hard news" is the typification most characterized by speed, presentness, temporal isolation. Yet this is exactly the category into which the coverage of political issues--the raw material supposedly enabling the social action of the citizen--invariably falls.

Some of the classics of news scholarship also contain indications that timeliness is not the only facet of journalistic convention that affects the temporal structure of news products in a schizophrenic manner. Harvey Molotch and Marilyn Lester (1974) observe that socially "important" occurrences are those which social groups find useful in marking time, for without common temporal markers individuals cannot share their perceptions and organize collectivities:

> the content of an individual's conceptions of the history and the future of his or her collectivity comes to depend on the processes by which public events get constructed as resources for discourse in public matters. The work of historians, journalists, sociologists and political scientists helps to accomplish this task for various public by making available to citizens a range of occurrences from which to construct a sense of public time. (pp. 102-103)

Thus, in order for knowledge to be useful in social situations, it must not only be rooted in some sort of systematic, historically constructed web of reference, it must also function to distinguish different moments along the historical scale from one another. News at first seems ideal for this. Presented with a cavalcade of extraordinary, "deviant" events by the news, can't we mark time by means of the deviances that occur in it? (This is certainly Molotch and Lester's conception.) Yet, news fails to relate one sort of deviance to another. When everything presented in the news is deviant by definition, how can this serve to separate and mark events? The fundamentally generic quality of news-as-the-unusual mitigates against consumers making meaningful temporal distinctions from it. In addition, today's deviance tends to be remarkably similar to yesterday's and tomorrow's. Beat structure, layout space allocation, framing conventions and standardized pegs, reportorial and editorial routine all combine in the tendency for journalistic institutions to issue the same kinds of stories again and again. Robert Darnton (1975) provides a number of examples of this from his experience at the New York Times, e.g., "I did [a story] on policemen's horses and learned after its publication that my paper had carried the same story, more or less, at least twice during the previous ten years" (p. 190), leading him to comment that reporting "was like making cookies from an antique cookie cutter." Paul Rock (1981) notes the effect of this routinization and repetition on our experience of temporality:

> the ritualized and cyclical nature of much reporting is a critical feature of the way in which the world is made known. It conveys an impression of eternal recurrence, of society as a social order which is made up of movement but no innovation. Change occurs in a series of small occurrences of small duration. There is no grand design." (p. 69, my emphasis)

Phillips, Roshco and Tuchman provide clues that the schizo-effect in news is not limited to temporal issues. Consider Phillips' remarks on the structure of news presentation:

> Making connections between events is also disallowed by the journalistic format, for the news media's unit of analysis is the news item: a self contained particle of 'reality.' Possible links between items, say one story concerning a 'racial disturbance' and another on high unemployment among black youth, are not suggested. The result in both print and electronic news media is a mosaic effect, a kaleidoscope of continually changing forms of surface reality. (p. 89, my emphasis)

In her discussion of "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual" (1972) Tuchman observes:

> Newspapermen must be able to identify 'facts,' even though some truth claims are not readily verifiable... The reporter can only determine that the senator stated 'A.' Newspapermen regard the statement 'X said A' as a 'fact' even if 'A' is false. (p. 665)

Thus, the importance of the statement is defined by the fact it was said, not its value in relation to any concrete reality. Utterance becomes disconnected from the realm of pragmatic experience, becoming merely a matter of presentation. Tuchman continues:

> by pairing truth-claims or printing them as they occur on sequential days, the newsmen claim "objectivity." ...A morass of conflicting truth claims... might more profitably be viewed as an invitation for the news consumers to exercise selective perception, a characteristic reaction to news. Indeed, the invitation to selective perception is most insistent, for each version of reality claims equal potential validity. (p. 666, my emphasis)

By treating statements without concern for their referentiality, news indicates that one fact or quote is as good as the next. Indistinguishable parts lose their respective meanings, and become reduced to their surfaces. Roshco notes that attempts by news producers to provide conceptual frameworks for reportage become grounds for attacks on press performance by sources and publics. Thus, "the norms of role performance usually imposed on reporters may even prevent them from conveying knowledge-about they do possess; allegedly, such reporting would not be 'objective'" (Roshco, p. 15). However, without some enhancement by knowledge-about, Roshco states that news "provides only superficial understanding of what is being reported" (p. 14).

One of the oft-used terms in discussions of the construction of typically schizophrenic postmodern cultural texts such as MTV[6] is bricolage--a term borrowed by semioticians from the structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, used to denote a mix and match assemblage of disparate signifiers commonly at hand without regard to their original signifieds, which could not all be maintained within the throw-everything-into-the-blender combination anyway. Somewhat amazingly (to me anyway), Phillips resorts to the same source to describe the operations of newsworkers, referring to the journalist as a bricoleur and quoting Levi-Strauss: "the engineer works by concepts and the bricoleur by means of signs" (p. 90). The engineer, defined here as the pragmatic subject-in-action is taken as the bi-polar opposite of the journalist/bricoleur operating in the realm of

pure experience of the material signifier. As an example of this, Phillips notes:

> Park [!] said of his own quest as a young man: "I made up my mind to go in for experience for its own sake... The result was that I went into the newspaper business." (p. 90, my exclamation and emphasis)

At this point, returning to Park, we might declare that news fits neither of his categories and therefore doesn't constitute any sort of knowledge at all, only pure schizophrenic experience. Yet, this claim still seems silly. News still appears to be meaningful as we encounter it in everyday life (as opposed to in scholarly writing). Admittedly, news is nowhere as a form of knowledge-about. However, news does constitute a sort of acquaintance-with, although of a different kind than that imagined by Park, Roshco or Phillips. News provides us with instinctual, sensuous experiential knowledge, not of the events it covers, but of its forms of presentation. Our acquaintance-with concerns not the news (the happening, the content), but news itself (the genre, the vehicle), which is in most cases far more material than the former, anyway. Here we enter the realm of simulation. Component units of news transmission may remain unrelated to each other, but within these units, especially the 'story,' there are distinct formal structures. The question is whether these structures link up to any concrete or ideological referents. Phillips writes "the journalistic format imposes a structure on events which is extrinsic to them" (p. 88). To this we can add that the structure imposed is the same from event to event. Rather than taking Darnton's account of story repetition

as evidence that journalistic presentation involves the ritual recitation of traditional content ('story' = particular content), I think we would do better to consider it as evidence of the ritual recitation of traditional form ('story' = particular structure of presentation) since forms get repeated far more often than any specific content that may be inserted into them. Thus news stories come to be about the display of their own structures, and moreover about the familiarity of that display.

But where do these familiar structures come from? Darnton testifies to the importance of editors' preconceptions (the model) in the generation of news stories (the 'reality'), but he notes that both editors and reporters have little or no contact with their 'public,' or with any reality outside the worlds of the source and, more importantly, of the newsroom itself. He concludes that the primary reference group for which journalists mold their work is other journalists. Darnton tells us that he produced his essay as a rebuttal of Pool and Schulman (1959), who claim that journalists tailor their work to their images of their reading publics. Yet, Pool and Schulman also indicate that journalists generally have no knowledge of their actual audiences, using the term "fantasy" throughout the essay to describe the audience-images held by the reporters they studied. They offer no explanation for the generation of these fantasies beyond the psychology and beat of the individual reporters, which hardly seems sufficient to constitute models for story generation. If audience fantasies do play a primary role in producing news frames, perhaps newsroom socialization has a major

role in their creation. Or perhaps the newsroom is now modeling itself on media images of newsrooms (in the long tradition from The Front Page to Hard Copy), and reporters' fantasy reference groups are now a function of media-generated images of the news audience. In any event, in true simulacral fashion, the media seems to be deriving its reality-images from itself, generating its reality-effects in reference to its own previous presentations.

Hall states, "Categories of news, consistently produced over time, create public spaces in the media which have to be filled" (p. 149) The model demands the generation of examples. Roshco argues that the canons of objectivity are at work here as well:

> Once the commitment to coverage is made, the likelihood is high that the consequent reportage will be published. This process is made even more determinate by the need to be "objective." To indicate that the president of the United States spoke or acted, but that what he said or did was not worthy of being reported, tends to violate news values... According to these criteria, a highly visible speaker gives news value to what he says, whatever its intrinsic significance. (p. 77)

Rock and Roshco discuss the self-generation of news in passages that I think need no further comment from me. In the third paragraph below, Roshco also provides an excellent illustration of the process in a story related to him by then NBC correspondent Robert MacNeil:

> a newspaper allots space... based on some initial definition of the absolute and relative importance of different areas. In part, that definition may be explained by convention: newspapers record crime and and sport because other newspapers record crime and sport. Indeed, it may be regarded as the essence of a newspaper that it covers such phenomena. Other features of the scheme may be attributed to journalistic understandings of popular morality and culture. For instance, crime news has traditionally been defined as attractive to

readers. Yet, in the absence of effective feedback from a readership, the solipsistic element of selection remains, and once formulated, the scheme tends to serve as its own authority. What has been news in the past is likely to be news again. (Rock p. 67)

The newsmaking process turns out...to be largely a feedback mechanism: only the visible can be assessed by newsmen as to its newsworthiness; only that which is deemed sufficiently newsworthy is published and gains widespread currency--among newsmen as much as the public; as currency grows, newsmen become more attentive and visibility is enhanced. Further access to the media is thus facilitated by previous appearance in the media. (Roshco, p.18)

In 1963, when Governor George Wallace tried to prevent the integration of Alabama's schools with his "stand in the schoolhouse door," NBC correspondent Tom Pettit, covering the story there, phoned a producer in New York, who started telling Pettit how to handle the story.

"There's a good story in the New York Times this morning," he said.

"We don't get the New York Times down here,' Pettit said.

"Well, the night lead of the AP says--"

"We don't have the AP."

"Never mind. The UP's got a pretty good angle on it--"

"We don't have the UP either," Pettit said.

"The producer said, "You don't have the UP?"

"No."

"You don't have the AP?"

"No."

"You don't have the New York Times?"

"No."

"Then how do you guys know what's going on down there?" (Roshco, p. 70)

Rock even states that this process generates a detached reality-effect--what Baudrillard would call a simulacrum, a hyper-real:

An interesting consequence of the search for an objectified and sure world of news is that the solipsism of the newspaper office may feed upon itself and transform newspapers into authoritative sources themselves. Once some newspaper ratifies an event as news, others may accept that ratification and treat the event as independently newsworthy. Journalists religiously read their own and others' newspapers; they consult one another; and look for continuities in the emerging world which their reporting has constructed. In this process, a generally consistent interpretation is maintained and built up. It possesses an independent and impersonal quality which makes it seem compelling.

> These self-generated paradigms may, in time, become virtually autonomous. They may become progressively detached from their base and then unfold with an internal logic of their own. In this fashion the press can create 'pseudo-disasters' which may have no discernible relation with events as they are known by outsiders. Pseudo-disasters, crime waves and panics create a reality which is organized by the structure of the newspaper office alone. (pp. 68-69)

What newsworthiness is "independent" of, then, is any larger social/historical context. It is also interesting to note as Rock associates this "independence" with the stance of objectivity, he describes it not merely as enhancing legitimacy or credibility, but with the term "compelling" which denotes the application of force or pressure. Thus, news presents its simulated reality-effect with a certain affective force, reminiscent I think of Jameson's notion of "intensities."

Celebrity is probably our society's most prevalent form of simulation. In the chapter devoted to journalism in their "sociology of knowledge based on craft, or occupational technique," Joseph Bensman and Robert Lilienfield (1973) begin by offering a typical statement that journalism serves a pragmatic function, providing its audience with practical utility. However, they find the process by which journalism works to accomplish this highly subject to falsification. Among their observations is the following account of the journalistic generation of celebrity:

> The journalist, like the novelist, in avoiding abstraction and the cold deadness of difficult and abstract themes, seeks to find the image or the personality that embodies the idea, and deals with the image or personality in place of the idea...
>
> Thus the journalistic treatment of Albert Einstein would emphasize his eccentricities: his haircut, his hatred of shaving cream, his absentmindedness, his proclivity for wearing old sweaters, all at the expense of any presentation

> of his contribution, which is defined as so abstract that allegedly only a dozen men could understand it.
>
> The concreteness and "comprehensibility" embodied in this form of journalistic treatment results in the "hero" or the "star," who symbolizes and personifies, in terms larger than life, a field of endeavor which would otherwise not be salient. Once the attempt is made to make the star salient, the person who is momentarily presented as a star has a fabricated image. The dramatic aspects have to be emphasized; traits are created either in the person himself, so that he is made to resemble his journalistic image, or so that the image is made independent of his genuine characteristics or qualities. (pp. 211-212)

Celebrity, like other news values, is self verifying. The "importance" of the celebrity becomes a discreet element, detached from context. When celebrities are generated in fields that have some knowledge-about sort of relevance (Einstein as opposed to Vanna) those fields become remade in simulation. An appearance of salience is generated using elements found in the general location where importance has been reported to reside (Einstein's haircut) but unrelated to the concrete salience (nuclear physics) which attracted the media attention in the first place.

I want to conclude this tracking of the postmodern beast through the jungle of scholarly journalism literature by looking at an article that not only indicates the presence of both schizophrenia and simulation in the news but begins to suggest the political effect this presence might have. This essay, written by Max Ways, appeared in Fortune in 1969 with the somewhat misleading title "What's Wrong with News? It Isn't New Enough." Ways is not writing for a general audience, nor is he concerned with the more sensational and spectacular popular conveyances of news. His position is that of the active,

demanding business decision-maker, and his point of reference is the quality press to which business people generally attend. Although he praises certain specific publications, he criticizes news in general for failing to present information in a manner that allows decision-makers to form comprehensive understandings of events, and therefore to generate effective policy. The problem for Ways is that news cannot cover trends, i.e. it is stuck in the specious present, unable to make meaningful temporal connections between occurrences.

> news today brings information about this change or that one. But in actual life these specific changes are colliding and combining with one another, often in ways...not alertly reported in the news. (p. 107)

Ways argues that this failure of news is made more acute by the fragmentation of knowledge in contemporary life. Public issues penetrate a constellation of specialized disciplines that extends far beyond the expertise of any individual. Prefiguring Lyotard's discussion of disappearing metanarrative, Ways argues that news may be the only institution left capable of providing the needed integration of social understanding: "Journalism's role... is critical in a society that can no longer depend on tradition to tell it what it is and how it operates" (p. 107).

However, I think the most interesting part of Ways' essay is that he ties the disconnectedness of news to the formation of the social opposition of the 60s, and although he clearly despises 'the movement' and considers it a troublesome source of disruption, his analysis ascribes this problem to the movement's

disconnectedness from the concrete social, which also consigns its action to impotence in terms of its stated goals.

> The generation now of college age is the first that was introduced to news through a medium mainly devoted to dramatized entertainment... The young viewer expects the news to fall into the same dramatic pattern, It is not surprising if he later becomes a recruit to the new anti-intellectualism apparent in the impatience of campus protestors who regard complex facts as distractions from the "gut commitment,"... Public expectation of moralistic drama presses all media toward defining news in terms of simple conflict. (p. 112)

In other words Ways sees movement politics as a matter of depthlessness and "intensities," a response to a simulacrum of national politics (dramatic patterns) rather than the concrete realities of policy formation. Thus, the movement directs itself not toward the pragmatic arena of policy construction, but toward the staging of more images. "The 'demonstration' becomes a dominant form of social action rather than the petition, the political debate, the lawsuit" (p. 112). Ways also states:

> When news fails to add up the permutations of change, the best informed men lack confidence that they know what's going on. Many of those who most confidently assert that they know, don't. Radicals and reactionaries both tend to ignore actual change and to derive their passionately held views from a simpler, more static society that isn't there. (p. 107-108)

Ways thus implies that the media's simulacrum of social and political relations is largely responsible for radicalism and reaction, and 'impatient' demands for dramatic change. Admittedly, this charge is unfair to much of the social opposition in the 60s, which had established roots in community organizing, pacifism and civil rights campaigns, but then Ways' comments reflect an understanding derived from media images, rather than first-hand experience of activists and their actions.

Yet, as Gitlin (1980) points out, this media-image appealed to a lot of young people who were then attracted to the movement. The influx of this "action faction" among other factors, resulted in the actual movement getting remade in the image of its simulacrum to a large degree. Gitlin indicts media coverage for fostering the formation of violent splinter groups like the Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army. The press fostered 'real' revolutionaries (if the revolution wasn't real, the weapons and bombs were) from its images of revolutionaries. Thus Ways' simulation-generated remarks become at least partially accurate after all. Jameson identifies this sort process as a general characteristic of postmodernity:[7]

> for political groups which seek actively to intervene in history and to modify its otherwise passive momentum (whether with a view towards channeling it into a socialist transformation of society or diverting it into the regressive reestablishment of some simpler fantasy past), there cannot but be much that is deplorable and reprehensible in a cultural form of image addiction which, by transforming the past visual mirages, stereotypes or texts, effectively abolishes any practical sense of the future and of the collective project, thereby abandoning the thinking of future change to fantasies of sheer catastrophe and inexplicable cataclysm--from visions of "terrorism" on the social level to those of cancer on the personal. (1984, p. 85)

If apocalyptics like Baudrillard provide the most persuasive analyses of postmodernity, perhaps this is because the postmodern instills a sense of apocalypse in its subjects. We usually encounter this as apathy, ironic detachment, or nihilism rather than terrorism. (I won't offer the postmodern condition as a complete explanation for drug abuse, teen suicide, hardcore punk and death metal, or the Honda Scooter "If it's not an answer, at

least it's not another question" spot, but I think it has something to do with all of them.) Unlike Baudrillard, I'm not ready to abandon all hope for an effective oppositional politics. Still, if the frame of understanding articulated above has any validity, we must expect opposition movements to display a "natural" tendency fizzle and fall apart. Those of us who desire progressive social change need to be aware of this process, prepared to deal with its consequences, and to search for ways of circumventing it.

Towards an Epistemology of the Postmodern

Admittedly, the reading of news scholarship just offered is little more than suggestive. There's certainly no hard evidence here, only the speculative word of a number of academics. Certainly many observers of the news will argue that these notions are simply wrong. Just as certainly some of the author's cited would consider my employment of their words as a gross misuse of their work. Assuming that at this moment the folks from column one of our old table of oppositions are reasserting their claims that news relates in one meaningful way or another to a concrete social/political reality, we need to pose the question of what sort of grounds might allow us judge whether the social effect of certain media forms is postmodern or not. I.e., how can we mediate between competing assertions that the function of the same cultural object is pragmatic, ideological or mythic on one hand and fragmentary, spectacular, or simulacral on the other? Obviously, this is more than a matter of cataloging the formal characteristics of cultural products in relation to some pre-

defined style--e.g. postmodernism is (a) accelerated, (b) segmented, (c) a-historical, and (d) over-saturated with stimuli; since MTV is all of a,b,c and d it must be postmodern. We need some other base of knowledge to tie these stylistic elements to particular modes of cultural consumption.

As a basis for analysis, the following distinctions can be drawn between the different cultural modes, postmodern and otherwise. (The postmodern modes will receive only brief attention, since simulation and schizophrenia have already been discussed in some detail.) Pragmatic reception involves direct connection on both ends of the signification process. Pragmatic reception involves direct connection on both ends of the signification process. Reasonably accurate presentations of the time and space characteristics of events and experience in the distant world are sought out by the subject based on the relevance of those events and experiences to the subject's world of action. Reception is structured at the subject's end, by the subject's historically based material needs and interests (action being both necessarily material and predicated on previous experience). In myth and ideology, the relation of signification to the actual events and experiences depicted is altered or eliminated. The representations of particulars from the distant world, including time and space, may be distorted or wholly fabricated. However, they do have meaningful connections to the larger social world of experience. Myth and ideology impart sense that comes from somewhere. They transmit values embodied in material positions and relations in social structure. Most

importantly, they connect to the subject's world of action, as their function is to orient that action within the larger social world, engendering participation in (or against) the prevailing structure. The dynamics of signification are structured by the needs and interests at both ends. The participation involved must appeal to the subject in some way, if only within the realm of the ideal, but the material interests served may or may not be those of the subject (depending on the degree and direction of power brought to bear on cultural processes). Since myth and ideology involve the maintenance of social structure, projecting the past into the future, they must necessarily be historical. Their significations must be rooted in the subject's previous experience of social participation. It is this historical connection that is severed in simulation. Thus, where myths are meaningful (in terms of orienting social action), simulacra are merely spectacular. Although simulation maintains time and space relations between its parts and presents an image of reality, these relations and images remain unrelated to the worlds of active experience at both ends. Signifiers are engaged as a formal system, rather than on the basis of any content that might be signified. Any subjective interests or needs involved in reception are unrelated to the pseudo-representation, but lie strictly within the production and consumption of the cultural object as an object. Schizophrenia is disconnected not only (usually) on both ends, but also in the middle. The materials of transmission remain unrelated in time and space, a reality-image

is either completely absent or dispersed into disunified scraps of referentiality.

Unfortunately, drawing distinctions based on reception dynamics rather than aesthetic features is only a first step towards being able to discern the postmodern. For one thing, all of the modes distinguished above appear in actuality as tendencies, not mutually distinct categories. The general reception of any cultural product will certainly involve a mixture of these tendencies, but individual instances of reception are also likely to involve some sort of mixture as well. (I may receive some effect of patriarchal ideology from the way the dancers are represented in Steve Winwood's "Higher Love" video, but primarily I am fascinated by the play of light and motion, the constantly changing texture of the image, the disrupting fragmentation of the editing.) Therefore we cannot mark cultural experience as postmodern simply by identifying dynamics of schizophrenia or simulation within it, we must establish that they are dominant.

The identification of the postmodern as "cultural dominant" is complicated by the fact that its appearance on the stage of history coincides with a transformation, a disjuncture, in the fabric of daily experience. Any search for postmodernity rooted in a sociology of knowledge tied to traditional views of the nature of everyday reality--as much contemporary sociological inquiry is--is fouled from the beginning. Berger and Luckman's opening chapter in <u>The Social Construction of Reality</u> is a perfect example of a model inadequate to the task, and thus a

sketch of the postmodern disjuncture in everyday life may emerge more clearly by contrast with their work.

For Berger and Luckman, everyday reality is experienced in "differing degrees of closeness and remoteness, both spatially and temporally." These zones of experience are organized around the "here" of the body and the "now" of the present. The nearest zone is the sphere accessible to bodily manipulation. Thus, "everyday life is dominated by the pragmatic motive." Moving outward towards the far zones, "our interest becomes less intense and certainly less urgent." The same logic of physical and temporal proximity governs social interaction--"the most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation." The pragmatic motive guides the acquisition of knowledge. We possess more complex and detailed information on that which we deal with frequently. Berger and Luckman use occupational situations as an example here. In fact, work is employed as the primary instance of central everyday experience throughout the essay. Beyond the far zones of everyday reality lie the "finite provinces" of other realities: theoretical abstraction, aesthetic expression, religious faith, etc. These provinces are "finite" because they are always bounded by everyday reality; consciousness leaves everyday reality to enter them and always returns there "as from an excursion." Transitions between provinces are clearly marked, Berger and Luckman use the example of the rising and falling of the curtain at a theater, and entail a "radical" shift in experience, or "leaping" in and out of the here and now.

The problem with Berger and Luckman is that they give us a common sense account of common sense. This winds up being circular. They explicate the nature of everyday consciousness through the experience of it, an approach that cannot consider the possibility of not-readily-apparent material bases of that nature--e.g. economic structures, technological environments, "signifying practices," etc. Specifically, they miss the reshaping of everyday life by the development and spread of mass media. In fact, the everyday life they describe no longer exists. Ubiquitous media have reconstructed the here and now, thoroughly disrupting the ordered zones of experience. True, we have more thorough knowledge of things we deal with often, but more and more what we deal with in contemporary everyday life is media. The sign is present physically, but its origin is absent. The media enters proximate space and time, but the mediated reality does not. A realm in which we may NOT act or interact begins to fill up the central zone. The far zones now scream with an urgency and intensity capable of drowning out the indigenous elements in the pragmatic zone where their ghosts appear. ("Be quiet! I'm watching 60 Minutes!) The finite provinces refuse to stay within their boundaries. Consciousness no longer leaps gracefully from one discrete province to another, but is bounced about in a chaotic slam-dance of provinces indiscernible among the jabber of urban life and the constant invasion of inescapable media. Everyday reality becomes defined as much by the two-dimensional significations subjects witness as by the four-dimensional (including linear time) experience through which they

move. Thus the notion that the other is only fully real when we meet her/him face to face, falls away in a culture fascinated with celebrity. The personas of Ronald Reagan and Bruce Springsteen probably have the most highly charged reality-effects of any in America. Yet, could being in their actual physical presence do anything but undercut the gravity of these realities? Of course, everyday consciousness is not totally dominated by imperializing simulacra. Most of us also still get strong doses of Berger and Luckman's everyday reality of pragmatic interests defined in work practices and social interaction. The problem is that the two realms get confused. The penetration of the media-real into the place where we expect to find only the pragmatic-real erases the distinctions between them as matters of experience. Not only is there a blending in initial perception, but the collapse of zones and provinces into equivalence and confusion tends to contaminate any order of acquired knowledge we may attempt to employ in separating one from the other on reflection.

In short, it is simply very difficult to tell whether experience is postmodern or not. The fragmentation of schizophrenia should be the easiest to identify. We can argue that it holds wherever cultural products exhibit a great appeal, but their consumers manifest no meaning or reality effects received from them, and no relational social participation is seen to be acted out around them. These would seem to be accessible empirically. Schizophrenia appears to be applicable primarily in contemporary youth culture, and indeed a number of

studies have shown teenagers largely unable to say anything coherent about what their favorite cultural products mean, or what they're about, or even why they like them. Yet, few scholars take these expressions at face value, convinced that the media in question have subconscious effects on attitudes and behavior, and the kids are simply too unsophisticated to understand or articulate their own situation. This leaves behavior as the most likely measure, but of course it is notoriously difficult to isolate any sort of behavioral determinants, and if the subject exhibits any behavior at all in relation to the larger social system one could claim that the allegedly schizophrenic cultural experience had something to do with it. Thus only in the case of relatively thorough passivity (including the absence of intellectual activity) accompanying great aesthetic interest can schizophrenia be safely inferred from observation.

Simulation is an even tougher nut to crack since the distinction between it and ideology is especially problematic. Both appear to represent reality and employ sequence and continuity, and in both the representation deviates significantly from any actual reality upon which it may have drawn. Thus, inquiry can not distinguish between them on the basis of their formal properties alone. Yet, the inflections of subjective experience are not apparent to a detached observer, and the common social scientific methodologies for extracting them are extremely suspect. Nor is the appearance of behavior related to the signification (we'll assume the two can be tied together for the sake of argument) a reliable indication of ideology.

Simulation may replicate itself in the actions of the subject. (The model produces its own corresponding reality.) However, this action cannot truly be social, since the simulation has no historical connection with the social. Unfortunately, this distinction resists detached inquiry as well, since it requires the observer to have a thorough knowledge of how the subject's relation to the social realm is constituted. Finally, the difference in inflection between simulation and ideology may not even be felt by the subject, since due to the confusions just mentioned, involvement with mediation and involvement in the sphere of participation may appear as the same thing. Normally the subject has no reason to question this appearance. Simulation is insulated within the media, never directing meaning (as ideology does) into the world of immediate experience where it might be contradicted by the relational sense generated in social practice, leading to a challenge of the simulacrum's reality-effect.

There is, however, a site where contradiction can occur between simulation and pragmatic experience. Simulation employs signs drawn from the world of concrete reality in a manner disconnected from that reality. Thus, a simulated experience is profoundly different in character from a pragmatic experience of "the real thing," i.e. participation in the concrete reality from which the signifiers of the simulation have been taken. When a subject engages in both of these experiences, perceptual movement across the boundary produces a distinct effect of shock. This is not a conflict of meaning, but of the material nature of

time/space relationships in and out of mediation. It is this disturbance in subjectivity at the joint of participation and simulation which can allow postmodernity to be perceived. However, confusion with ideology can occur here as well. A similar shock occurs at the joints between experience of ideological representations and experience of the concrete realities from which they are derived. However, the disturbance is not as sizeable because it can be understood. It has a social or political purpose in relation to the subject's pragmatic experience, a tie to the realm of historical meaning (e.g. a worker who has repeatedly witnessed safety violations and accidents at the new high tech plant where she works, views a documentary depicting the industry she works in as a model of economic rejuvenation complete with images of informal, eccentric new-age managers startlingly similar to the granola-crunching boy execs who are her bosses). However, the meaningful connection is not necessarily activated, understanding is not always produced.

To add to the confusion, subjects' may read non-ideological signs (where little no connection to the norms of social structure or the exercise of power was involved at the production end) through their existing ideological frames, producing a post hoc projection of that ideology onto the received signifiers. Thus, a shock effect actually derived due to postmodern alienation from signification may be taken by the subject as an ideological effect in an attempt to understand the experience. Such projection seems to occur often when people confront simulacra of their immediate worlds, being especially likely when

the minority elements in a mixed dynamic of signification have some ideological connectedness to subjectivity, and when the subject is participating in a pragmatic reality with a high degree of ideological charge (such pragmatic realities being among those most likely to be source material for the generation of simulations). Thus, the minority effect is taken to explain the whole enchilada. However, this confusion can be removed, and postmodernity perceived, if the subject reviews or revisits the occasion of the shock effect at a time when the ideological charge on the participatory experience at the joint has dissipated and/or been displaced by the adoption of a non-experiential frame of reference such as systematic theory ("knowledge about").

What follows is an extended example of this sort of process, which will also, finally, bring us back to the news. I'm going to tell you a story about some events in my life in the past ten years. It is a subjective reflection, totally anecdotal, the sort of thing "rigorous scholarship" is supposed to eschew. But this is not an apology. The point of this section is that extremely important aspects of contemporary mass-mediated life are simply not suited to any form of conventional analysis, with the applicability of methods to postmodern issues generally being in inverse relation to their scientific legitimacy. If the most important "effects" of media are not large scale attitude or behavior changes, but, as I believe, reworkings of the fabric of everyday life, then scholars of the media will need to begin giving more attention and more credence to anecdotes, reflections

and other academically disreputable observations, for these are the ways human subjects reveal their understandings of their day to day experience.

Apocalypse 1980

The night before the 1980 Wisconsin presidential primary, I was standing on the grounds of the state capital in Madison, where Jerry Brown (D-California) was to deliver a speech. Brown had done poorly in the previous primaries and caucuses, and his people were concentrating exclusively on Wisconsin in a last-ditch attempt to revive his fading campaign. His appearance that night was to be his major effort in the state; in effect the overall fate of his candidacy was on the line. However, I was not there for the political drama. My interest was more vocational. At the time, I was an MA student in the UW Communication Arts department, studying film and video production. Brown's appearance promised to be a media event well worth witnessing. Francis Ford Coppola, along with a small entourage of production and promotion people from his Zoetrope studios, had accompanied the governor to Madison. A live 30 minute television extravaganza titled "The Shape of Things to Come," produced and directed by Coppola, was to be constructed around the speech and broadcast over a statewide network.

There were cameras positioned all around the capital square. Roving cameramen moved through the crowd. A helicopter with camera hovered overhead. A huge TV projection screen flanking the podium displayed images of Bill Graham chatting with members of the crowd about Brown's politics and the Grateful Dead. I knew

Coppola had amassed a collection of still images to be employed in the production, the plan being to chroma-key them behind the image of Brown in a sequence signifying the rebirth of a stagnant America. Moments before the show was to begin, the giant screen displayed a machine-gun run-through of the stills, each image appearing on screen for only an instant. The crowd oohed and aahed as the images flashed by. Then the screen went blank, and Brown stepped to the podium and began to speak. I figured the televised version would be more interesting than the live speech, and so I was disappointed when the big screen stayed empty. However, a press table was right behind me, and a line monitor was set up there. So even though I had a good view of Brown in the flesh, I turned around, leaned over, and watched the show upside down on the monitor.

I suspected that Coppola might have something besides the chroma-key images in his bag of tricks, and indeed I heard later that a number of other things had been planned to illustrate the theme of stagnancy and rebirth. Apparently, the show was supposed to open with a helicopter shot of homeless people standing around fires in the snow--an image of the new depression. However, on arriving in Madison the advance people for Zoetrope were shocked to find that there is no snow in southern Wisconsin at the end of March. They didn't have much luck in their attempts to recruit appropriately grizzled-looking senior citizens to portray the homeless, either. The representation of rebirth also turned out to be troublesome. At the end of the speech, Coppola apparently wanted Linda Ronstadt to emerge from the crowd on roller skates

to join the governor in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. The Brown people balked at this, and in return Coppola is reported to have shouted something to the effect of, "Jerry Brown is an actor in my production, that's it!"

The media version was more interesting than the live speech, but not due to any of the planned effects. The Brown staff must have won out, because the Ronstadt appearance never came off. But then, none of the media tricks came off. Despite being a live-tv neophyte, Coppola had decided to call the shots for the show himself. Now, consider the environment Coppola faced in the control truck. He could only see the action through the limited frames of camera-vision, sense of the larger environment was lost. He had at least half a dozen cameras at his command, plus the mass of stills in telecine, and probably some videotape. Each of these sources was displayed on a bank of monitors. Coppola faced a host of images--including a variety of different perspectives of the same subject displayed simultaneously--each clamoring for attention as the event relentlessly unfolded in real time. It takes a lot of practice to develop an orderly conceptualization of this environment, and to learn how to negotiate control over it. Coppola didn't have it, and when the on-the-air sign lit up he panicked. He wound up staying on a single medium shot of Brown for the entire half-hour. The cameras in the helicopter and around the square were never used, none of the stored images were ever brought in. Brown just stood there against the blue chroma-key drop. However, the chroma-key circuit had been turned on, and it remained on for the whole show.

Unfortunately, the lighting on the drop wasn't right, and so the chroma-key kept trying--and failing--to distinguish Brown from the background, causing his image to break up, fade and crackle around the edges. Through it all, Francis Ford Coppola--auteur and master manipulator of popular culture--sat frozen before the array of disconnected images dancing in front of him.

The next day, April Fool's day 1980, the people of Wisconsin cast their ballots--mainly for people other than Jerry Brown--and the University of Wisconsin Teaching Assistant's Association, AFT local 3220, went out on strike. Since 1970 the union and the university had entered into a series of contracts, providing for, among other things, limitations on class-size and work loads, and binding third-party arbitration for the resolution of grievances. The contact also stated that it was to cover all graduate students performing regular teaching duties under faculty supervision. In the late seventies the union won a series of arbitration awards stemming from grievances of departmental violations of the contract. The most notable case involved the awarding of back pay to students in the Ag school who were required to teach although they were designated as RAs and received RA pay, which was substantially lower than the TA pay specified in the contract. By 1979 the administration had gotten tired of losing arbitration cases and set out to overhaul their relationship with the TAA. They demanded a number of takebacks. Most importantly, they wanted the contract to cover only those graduate assistants designated as TAs by the university, and they wanted the binding arbitration clause eliminated. The contract

expired in August of '79, but the administration continued to be as adamant in their demands as the union was not to give in to them. Seven months later, convinced that the university was refusing to bargain in an attempt to bust the union, the TAA walked out.

At the time of the strike, I was a teaching assistant for a television production class. I belonged to the TAA, but I hadn't paid much attention to union matters until the contract expired and the possibility of a strike emerged. When I began to examine the issues, I concluded that the union's position was reasonable and just, and the university's was neither of these. I had a conventional middle-American fear of rabid revolutionaries, but although a few TAA people looked like refugees from SDS barricades of the sixties, on the whole most of the members I knew, including the elected leadership, were not only reasonable folks, they were extremely nice, too. So, both as a matter of principle and as a matter of supporting good people who were also my friends, I voted for the strike, and when the time came I walked out of class and onto the picket line.

The strike lasted five weeks. Very quickly, though, it turned into a bitter, polarizing affair. Picket lines were set up around classroom buildings and university loading docks. The union asked students to boycott classes. Compliance was good at first, especially in the humanities where the union was strong. Most of the faculty continued to teach as usual, but a few refused to cross picket lines, instead setting up off-campus meeting sites for their classes. There were rallies and

demonstrations, songs and slogans. The university administration closed ranks and got tough. The campus police made harassment arrests of picketers for loitering or disorderly conduct. Ten days into the strike, campus police arrived in full riot gear to escort a truck delivering liquid nitrogen past a picket line at the Chemistry Building. They cleared the picket line with unprovoked force; TA picketers were clubbed, kicked and sprayed with Mace in the process. Picketers received physical abuse from the campus cops on several occasions after that as well; one outspoken Art TA seemed to get special attention from the officers because he was gay. Some of the sympathetic professors attacked the administration's strong arm tactics in the Faculty Senate; a few even spoke at TAA rallies. A group of undergraduates formed a support group for the union. On their own initiative, they took over and occupied an administration building for two days, protesting that their education was being disrupted by the University's strike policy and demanding that the University negotiate in good faith. A week later, this time assisted by TAs, the support group occupied another administration building for a couple more days. However, neither the work stoppage, nor any of the succeeding protests, were followed by any measure of conciliation on the part of the university. As the weeks wore on, and administration intransigence continued, many union members and supporters became weary and began to feel the cause was hopeless. Finally, as the end of the semester neared, the membership voted to return to work without a contract. The university had won. The

administration declared it would no longer recognize or bargain with the TAA. Many of the undergrads who had observed the picket lines got lousy grades for the semester. Striking TAs who were out-of-state residents had their tuition remissions revoked. Assistant professors who had moved their classes off campus were denied tenure.

I saw a lot of things that made me angry during the strike. I saw people who were supposed to be guiding an institution of enlightenment employ the full scope of their power without compromise, pity or remorse just to avoid surrendering the slightest bit of that power so that intellectual workers might have some small say in the equity of their work conditions. I saw that on those few occasions when the managers of this huge state institution might have felt their administrative force unable to keep a small group of dissident educators in line, the naked fist of the police lay waiting behind the paper fist of the bureaucracy. I saw scholars who espoused liberal values of truth and justice, and even some self-styled advocates of left-progressive social change, clam up and support the system when their own routines were disturbed and their own interests threatened. And I saw a lot of good people get hurt in one way or another for opposing the abuse of power and standing up for minimal rights and fair treatment. However, I also saw things that inspired me. I saw union members come together in collective action in a most remarkable way. And I saw strikers sharing a commitment, a caring, a bond of solidarity in the face of a trying struggle. My memories of this remain as the basis for

whatever hopes I yet have for utopian community or progressive social change.

Of course, I didn't see any of this on the news. As I looked at and listened to the coverage of the strike, I felt a profound gap between my experience of events and the representations of those events in the media. I had, first of all, a very visceral sensation of dislocation and alienation. On a more cognitive level, I began thinking that the news was distorting things in favor of the university. At the time, though, I didn't have a systematic understanding of how this distortion worked. I hadn't studied the politics of media much before the strike. I had been taking classes in video and filmmaking primarily, focusing my attention on production aesthetics and techniques. I think I wanted to become a Hollywood director, or to create "quality" dramatic specials for public TV. But I was radicalized by the events of the strike. I became interested in critical communication literature: H. M. Enzensberger, Claus Mueller, a little bit of the Frankfurt School. Then, Todd Gitlin came out with The Whole World Is Watching. Here was an analysis not just of the power of news in general, but of its role in the obstruction and containment of opposition political movements, derived from an experience very much like my own. (The strike was widely considered to be a sort of low-grade rerun of Madison's old anti-war days.) Bang! An understanding of the strike news and its importance fell into place. Gitlin had the answers: Ideology, structural bias, hegemony.

I decided that I should aim for some sort of "career" in counter-hegemonic practice: either alternative media work or teaching. After I left Madison, I tried to pursue the alternative production path for a bit, with no great results. So my goal became to get a job teaching critical issues in mass communication to college kids. I knew I needed a PhD to do this, so I returned to grad school. My intention was to learn more about how corporate ownership fosters a media structure that automatically generates a capitalist view of world, and marginalizes opposing positions by denying them access to the channels of mass distribution, so that I could teach students about these processes more effectively.

However, life has a habit of turning different from the way we plan it. I wound up rooming with a guy who was deeply into in postmodern theory, especially Baudrillard. I began getting introduced to this thought just by being around him. As a filmmaker and rock music fan, I had been fascinated by rock videos, so when some of my colleagues set up a study group on MTV, I thought I'd set aside the more obviously political media like the news for a bit and join them. At first I tried to apply my critical paradigm to MTV, but I soon realized it just didn't work in this context; it didn't have terms to discuss the things I was seeing in the videos. Some of the postmodernist analysis, though, spoke to my observations directly, and helped me to define these perceptions and generate a theoretical scheme to cover them. As I formulated a position on MTV, I realized it was relevant to a lot of other media forms, including some I had

previously tucked comfortably away into my political paradigm. Without changing my politics, I nevertheless began to alter my view of how media operate socially and politically. I still considered media generally as working to protect the status quo, helping inoculate the system against oppositional politics. However, I came to suspect that many media forms do so as much (if not more) through the deconstruction of sense as through its construction. Yet, I never imagined that news operated anything like MTV, except for recent mutations like USA Today, which I took as having little relation to the central values of journalism.

Then, as I began to read some of the traditional literature on the social theory of news, I noticed some resonances between this writing and postmodernist discourse. I began to suspect that postmodernism might be more applicable to news generally than I had thought (and more historically, too, considering how long ago Robert Park had made his comments about news existing in the "specious present"). However, I felt that this application had to be relatively limited, that at best news worked in postmodern ways only for some of the audience, some of the time. I generated a tentative hypothesis which I hoped to develop into a paper: a postmodern dynamic would apply mainly to casual consumers of the news, people who had developed postmodern habits elsewhere, but for more politically involved reader/viewers, news still operates to construct meaning, ideology, etc. Thus, I began to theorize a connection between postmodernity and news that excluded myself and my experience from the issue.

However, this was soon to change. I saw that the 1987 AEJMC T&M miniconference was going to be at Wisconsin. I like Madison, and there were a couple people there I wanted to see, so I quickly signed up to go. I submitted an abstract of the paper I had immediately at hand, which was another analysis of MTV. But then I started thinking about the strike. I remembered that the UW journalism department, hosts of the conference, had a 100% scab rate; all j-school professors and TAs had crossed the picket lines. The j-school had also been the province of Prof. Steve Chaffee, an influential and outspoken opponent of the union. I realized that the conference coincided not only with the general anniversary of the strike, being in April, but more specifically the anniversary weekend of the Chemistry building police riot. Moreover, I learned that the TAA, which is still active, had recently won the right to hold a new representation election. With the possibility that the University would be forced to bargain with the Union for the first time since the strike, the administration was conducting a typically unscrupulous propaganda campaign to coax and/or intimidate TAs from voting for the union. Announcement of the election results would come while the conference was in session. Under all these conditions, I felt I had to use my conference presentation to discuss the strike: I still draw inspiration from the commitment I shared with my union sisters and brothers, and I'm still angry about the injustices that were done to us, thus for me to speak at that time and place without bearing witness to this in some way would be an act of

both intellectual and moral dishonesty, a betrayal of that collective commitment.

So I put away my MTV material and began casting about for some sort of presentation idea that would be suitable for a communications conference and still make a relevant political statement. Gitlin's work immediately came to my mind as a model. I thought, "I'll do an analysis of the ideological bias in press reports of the strike!" So, I traveled to Madison to examine the strike coverage that had appeared in the two local newspapers, the Wisconsin State Journal and Capital Times. (Although these papers have separate editorial staffs, they share physical and production facilities in a JOA under the name Madison Newspapers Incorporated, commonly abbreviated as MNI.) Clearly, this had to be a case of an ideological effect. No alternative explanations, especially postmodernist ones, entered my thoughts as I planned my study. Not only could the critical paradigm explain how the media worked against the union, it offered a ready position for the sort of declaration of insurgence I wanted to present to the conference. I assumed my analysis of the MNI coverage would reveal the same sort of structural bias Gitlin had described. I made copies of ~~every~~ almost every story on the strike printed in both the State Journal and Cap Times, so I could go over them in detail, noting the specific mechanics of distortion, the precise points of hegemonic practice.

However, as I read through the material, I began to question the value of such a study. I realized it wouldn't show anything that hasn't already been repeatedly spelled out in the critical

literature: Journalism relies on official sources, thus transmitting the official version of events; social movements are delegitimated by frames of conflict and deviance; the stories the news tells are invariably in line with dominant mythology. I don't mean to belittle these observations. Their current familiarity provides an ironic perspective on the TAA's strategy for the strike. The union realized it had virtually no chance to actually shut down the university's operation. The hope was that the strike would be enough of a nuisance to the administration that they would agree to a reasonable settlement as the most efficient means of calming the waters in their administrative pond (deviation from routine function being assumed anathema to all bureaucrats). A major part of this nuisance would be constituted by public opinion. The union felt the strike would be bad for the administration's image--making them appear as bad managers at least, if not repressive authoritarians--thus disturbing another set of (public) relations the administration could best normalize by signing a contract. Concerned not to aid the administration in the battle for the public mind, union leaders tried to prevent the formation of negative images of the TAA. Unseemly behavior was to be avoided on the picket line; only carefully schooled, diplomatic spokespeople were allowed to talk to reporters. In retrospect, this all seems extremely naive. Media managers and university administrators belong to the same class, they have a natural affinity for one another and probably even hob-nob at the same social affairs. The reportorial workforce was unlikely to have gained any sympathy for labor in

their journalistic training: I already noted the scab rate in the UW J-School. More importantly, MNI had recently broken its production unions in a long, bitter strike, and much of its original reporting staff had honored the picket lines and lost their jobs to scab replacements. How could the union have expected anything but a media presentation in line with management positions?

My review of the MNI coverage revealed that, with a few exceptions, that's pretty much what we got. However, I never got around to completing the analysis of exactly how the newspaper stories embody a dominant position. As I reread them, I was surprised to discover that something else struck me as their most notable feature. I was impressed not so much by any sort of bias in them, but how superficial and distanced they are. They are typical news items. Although the strike was a relatively "big story," receiving a good deal of space in the papers, the issues are never explored or examined. The State Journal never makes clear what the points of contention in bargaining were, and though the Capital Times correctly lists the contract issues at hand several times, that is about as far as the story goes. (We learn that there is dispute over the scope of the bargaining unit and binding arbitration, but what do these things mean exactly and why are they important in this context?) Instead, attention is focused on how many strikers or students showed up here or there to picket or protest or attend class today, or the carefully worded, diplomatically obtuse statements of administrators, faculty or the occasional TAA press release. This

limited information is compressed into terse bit-sized chunks. The strike, like the rest of the news, is always "out there," the reader held at arms length. The strike sinks into the upholstery of the everyday journalistic mix-and-match of the routine and trivial. The paper presents "TAA, UW Trade Barbs" "More Crumbling Highways" "American Potatoes in Ireland?" and "Civil War Artifacts Survive Close Call, Now on Display," all in the same manner. They are formal equivalents. Looking at the strike coverage in its context it seems astounding to have hoped that it could have ever generated a public opinion strong enough to effect the issue one way or the other. If one were to draw out some sort of narrative or set of principles lying behind the stories, they would certainly be establishment principles, a narrative of the status quo. But this is sort of like comparing a grenade with the shrapnel it produces. Although the field of exploded fragments may be determined by the previously intact whole, the two have very different natures. The shrapnel contains no suggestion and no latent code for a reconstruction of the grenade, but rather the opposite: a declaration of the futility of any such attempt.

(By the way, neither the State Journal nor Capital Times were Gannett-style USA Today-ified, color-weather-map-and-summary-column newspapers. They weren't the Philadelphia Enquirer either, but for newspapers in a mid-size midwestern city, they both had good reputations in traditional journalistic terms.)

At this point I had sort of a revelation. I realized that although I had been considering my political analysis of the

strike coverage and my attempt to locate some connection between news and postmodern culture as completely different projects, with different purposes, methods and conceptualizations, they were really inseparable.

The fundamentally insubstantial nature of the MNI stories leads to the suggestion that bias one way or the other in the coverage of events like the strike is ~~the~~ not the most important factor media representations play in these struggles. With every declaration of "all the news that's fit..." and "that's the way it is" news recasts the world in the image of its own depthlessness, declaring that any possibility of substance beneath the surface either does not exist or does not matter.

Like the Zoetrope advance staff, the TAA had great difficulty in getting material realities to behave as dutiful simulacra of their media-simulated images of reality. Other actors refused to play the roles we had assigned them: the press refused to tell the truth, take the side of the little guy, act as a watchdog against abuses of state authority; most of the public refused to pay attention to the deviation from normal campus activity, and the administration refused to worry about their image. In addition, the membership seemed unable to come to terms with events that, like Madison's absent snow, refused to follow familiar narratives. One of the mass media's great simulacra cum ideological effects is the impression of an over-riding moral order in the world. Yet, the good guys <u>didn't</u> win. Justice did <u>not</u> triumph in the end. In the wake of thorough defeat and subsequent reprisals, even the righteousness of the

union's stand remained problematic, outside of easy affirmation and validation. Most importantly, the strike refused to make formal progress in the manner of TV and movie narratives. Events moved slowly, if they "moved" at all. The anticipated points of crises and resolution failed to materialize, replaced by continued stand-off and stalemate. By the second week of the strike it became apparent that the strike was not going to follow a definable, finite, dramatic pattern. It was not going to work its way to a denouement in an hour or 120 minutes, or any real time analogy thereof. The materiality of events forced a different reality into our minds, a vision of a long term struggle with no clear definitions of terms and no resolution in sight (the MNI strike was in its sixth year at the time). I am convinced that this conflict with media-bred expectation frightened and depressed much of the membership, and contributed mightily to the waning of support within the ranks as the strike progressed.

And what of public opinion? It was trapped in the control room with Coppola, frozen in front of the varied, detached and decontextualized slices of reality transmitted by our miraculous technologies, not only unable to act in the distant space represented, but even to see the relationships between the pieces. The news exposed the strike only to strip away its meaning and reduce it to mere information. Rather than shill systematically for the dominant ideology, it blanked the ideological discourses of both the union and the university by collapsing them into the fetishized, superficial spectacular of

the media system as a whole. I now think that it was this reductionism, this blankness, that was at the root of my gut reaction to the representations of the strike. My accompanying cognitive explanation of establishment bias was a projection of the partisan nature of the struggle, the terms in which I experienced my everyday life, onto the representations of that struggle, which were created and largely consumed by people who had a very different, more distanced, dry and detached experiential relation to these events.

And in conclusion...

It is exactly this distance, this dryness, this detachment that poses a problem to any notion of participatory democracy. In a democracy, movements for social progress demand some sort of action or involvement from broad, general constituencies. Yet, an activist constituency cannot be formed unless the noise barrier can be broken, unless the issue can breach the separation between spectacle and spectator, jump off the page or the screen and into the three-dimensional daily life of the subject. The problem is that our media culture continues to become more fragmented, more superficial, more seductively spectacular, and more ubiquitous all the time. This does not, as the Happy Postmodernists suggest, produce a social chaos in which the collapse of the status quo is imminent. There is only an absence of semiosis, not of material order. Business goes on as usual. The maintenance of the social system lies in its material structures and habitual practices, which permeate all the levels of our existence, down to the micro-physics of power Foucault talks about. This order operates

as a functional automaton. It may be to its benefit at certain times and places to generate meanings to support itself, to communicate--but it does not need to. It is perfectly capable of continuing to run on its own momentum. And if worst comes to worst, it still has police forces and armies and courts to tidy up the mess. It is those who would oppose this order, especially those attempting to offer more democratic alternatives, that need communication, need to generate discourses of meaning that are real and vital enough to significantly large group of people that they become motivated to break the usual patterns and act for change. That postmodern culture mitigates against this is the genius of contemporary social control.

NOTES

1. Jameson is pessimistic about postmodern developments, and Baudrillard's vision may be best described as apocalyptic. Although this essay focuses on these views, it should be noted that other thinkers--including Lyotard, Hebdige (1986) and Haraway (1985)--see postmodern fragmentation as fostering a breakdown of cultural systems of domination, yet stopping short of the production of social isolation. In decentered subjectivity and collapsed boundaries, meaning is destabilzed rather than destroyed, creating openings for new, fluid, possibly liberating relations and practices.

2. This pair of terms applies only to pessimistic/apocalyptic postmodernism. The Happy Postmodernists would probably substitute this opposition instead:
[Social determination, totality] [Activation of difference, new potentials]

3. Similarly, Happy Postmodernists can bolster their optimism toward cultural fragmentation by pointing to the sins of the passing ideological order.

4. --except perhaps someone like Baudrillard who has made a career out of telling anyone who will listen that everything they know is wrong, and who not only appears to see the implosion of society and culture as inexorable destiny, but seems to be eagerly awaiting the apocalypse.

5. The Happy Postmodernists lose the basis for their celebration here, too, for we are left without a nasty ideological past of totalized meaning from which cultural fragmentation and recombination can provide liberation.

6. For discussions of MTV in relation to the postmodern see the Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10:1, Winter 1986.

7. The (unfortunately little-seen) film The Third Generation by the late R. W. Fassbinder offers a chilling vision of what Jameson is talking about. A band of politically isolated, bourgeois German terrorists, with no apparent program other than stating their own disaffection, kidnap an American industrialist in order to generate a media event with their ransom demands. They never realize that the very same industrialist is manipulating their group for media purposes of his own. The terrorists spend a lot of time watching videotapes of some sort of talk show, which continue to play in the background when they engage in other business. A constant stream of sound from the tapes runs behind virtually all of the dialogue, making much of it difficult to distinguish. As the film ends, the terrorists are videotaping the industrialist. In the last shot we see an image of him, wearing a smug grin, displayed on a video monitor.

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